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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000086

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL STRAINED BUT INTACT

REF: A. ANKARA 38

[1](#)B. ANKARA 25

[1](#)C. 08 ANKARA 2197

[1](#)D. 08 ANKARA 2190

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Widespread public outrage over Israel's incursion into Gaza and upcoming nationwide local elections in March have contributed to the harsh tone of Turkey's political discourse regarding Israel. Despite his inflammatory condemnation of the humanitarian situation, PM Erdogan has refused to comply with growing demands that Turkey sever or downgrade its ties with Israel. Many opinion leaders here acknowledge the importance of the Turkey-Israel strategic relationship. Behind the scenes, the Turkish MFA is diligently working to keep the lines of communication open between Tel Aviv and Ankara. When the GOI withdraws from Gaza and the daily images of civilian casualties fades from the front pages, the GOT will focus on mending the damage caused by the political rhetoric. This process could be slowed if Ankara perceives an Armenian genocide resolution (AGR) gaining steam due to a lack of opposition by Israel and its supporters in the U.S. End summary.

A Complicated Relationship

[1](#)2. (C) Our MFA contacts admit that the Second Intifada and the 2002 election of the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) have cooled Turkey-Israel bilateral ties, which were warmer in the 1990s. Israel has become an easy target for Turkish politicians hoping to score points with constituents who disapprove of GOI actions in Palestine and Lebanon. This has become a persistent irritant in the relationship. Turkish society is extremely sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians, MFA Israel desk officer Rauf Alp Denktas told us. The tone of friendship waxes and wanes according to Israeli actions in the region, and the status of the Middle East peace process. Still, Israeli officials tell us they overlook the political rhetoric for the sake of the strategic relationship.

[1](#)3. (C) Strong economic, trade, tourism, and military ties (increasingly leaning in Turkey's favor) are an anchor during turbulent political periods. In 2007, bilateral trade reached USD 2.7 billion, up from USD 2.3 billion in 2006. During the same period of time, the number of Israelis visiting Turkey increased from 362,500 to 511,400 (over 7 percent of the Israeli population). Israel hosted the eighth joint Turkey-Israel-U.S. naval search and rescue exercise Reliant Mermaid in August 2008. On November 29, 2008, the Turkish military accepted the delivery of the first two of ten Israeli Heron unmanned aerial vehicles, which the Turkish military needs to fight the PKK.

A Difficult Patch

14. (C) The Gaza operation's length and severity has struck a particularly strong chord with the Turkish public, resulting in unprecedented demonstrations and growing calls to sever ties with Israel (refs a, b). Middle East Technical University (METU) International Relations Department Head Meliha Altunisik explained to us that while Turks have always had an emotional reaction to such Israeli actions, traditionally only Islamist and leftist parties have rallied around the issue. For the first time, she said, all parties from across the political spectrum have weighed in strongly on Israeli actions in Gaza, motivated by the prospect of tapping into voters' emotions in the run-up to local elections in March. Turkish leadership has focused exclusively on the humanitarian aspect of the Gaza crisis. As a result, argued Altunisik, Turkey has now entered a dangerous cycle of public outrage followed by heated political rhetoric which then further incites public outrage.

She added that the small number of intellectuals calling for perspective have been attacked for being pro-Israel. Denktas noted that such rhetoric is not new for this administration. Prime Minister Erdogan made similar statements following the Israeli killing of Sheik Yessin in 2004. The relationship, he maintained, eventually recovered as it will once again following the current crisis.

Walking the Political Line

15. (C) Boxed in by growing public condemnation of Israel and heated rhetoric from opposition parties, PM Erdogan and his

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administration have sought not to allow pre-election pandering to jeopardize long-term ties with Israel. Erdogan has argued that the bilateral relationship is in Turkey's strategic interest (ref b). Foreign Minister Babacan, Defense Minister Gonul, and other GOT officials have also underscored that Turkey does not/not plan to sever defense or any other relations. GOT Spokesman Cemil Cicek stated "though there have been ups and downs in the political relationship between Turkey and Israel, military ties are not to be affected because of the depth of the relationship, which serves Turkey's strategic interest."

16. (C) At the same time, the GOT has orchestrated a series of events highlighting Turkey and Erdogan's role in finding a solution to the Gaza crisis. The Prime Minister's wife, Emine, hosted a "First Ladies Summit" in Istanbul January 10 where leaders' wives from Jordan, Syria, Qatar, Libya, and Pakistan issued a joint plea to halt the killing of Palestinian children and women. Two days later, the Ministry of National Education (MONE) issued instructions to all Turkish primary schools to observe a moment of silence on January 13 for Palestinian children killed in Gaza.

Salvaging Efforts

17. (C) Israeli Embassy Spokesman Amit Zarouk told us that both sides are working hard to maintain the bilateral relationship. He reported lines of communication between Ankara and Tel Aviv remain open. Presidents Gul and Peres, Foreign Ministers Livni and Babacan, and senior diplomats in both capitals continue to speak regularly, if not daily. MFA Israeli Desk Officer Denktas added that while PM Erdogan has refused to speak with Israeli PM Olmert, their top advisors are in constant communication. Zarouk emphasized that the Turkish MFA is undertaking extensive damage control efforts to minimize the impact of increasingly anti-Israeli rhetoric.

The MFA reportedly convinced the ruling AKP not to issue a formal statement after a contentious January 6 Gaza crisis debate in parliament (Note: Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Murat Mercan disputed this account in a January 16 discussion with us. He said the AKP and the opposition parties had simply been unable to agree on the resolution wording. End note) Turkish Ambassador Tan underscored to

Israeli MFA officials in Tel Aviv that PM Erdogan's remarks reflect his need to cater to his political base. Undersecretary Apakan and Deputy Undersecretary Sinirlioglu have echoed the same message to Israeli Ambassador Levy. Denktas commented to us that the MFA's primary role in the Gaza crisis has been to keep the bilateral relationship afloat until after the storm subsides.

18. (C) During his January 14 meeting with the Ambassador, U/S Apakan made clear that Turkey sought to keep relations at the same level with Israel and saw that maintaining these relations was in its interest. Apakan said that Turkish public opinion and some individuals are reacting to events in Gaza by reflex, as this is a highly emotional issue. Turkey, as a democratic country, must acknowledge the desires of its populace, he said, but at the end of the day, must make rational choices based on its interests. There is no place for sentiment in Turkey's policy choices.

19. (C) Zarouk told us that the MONE school initiatives crossed a red line for Israel. On January 12, Ambassador Levy met with U/S Apakan to express "extreme discontent." Pressing MONE, the MFA was able to cancel MONE's proposed essay and drawing contests and secure agreement that the GOT would not expand the moment of silence beyond primary schools to other public institutions. Nevertheless, following the event, children were sent home with letters soliciting financial donations to ease the humanitarian crisis perpetuated by "atrocities committed by the Israeli Government." Responding to increased Israeli discontent, the MFA dispatched Deputy U/S Sinirlioglu January 14 to Tel Aviv to underscore that the GOT values the bilateral relationship and to encourage an expeditious end to the violence. Zarouk reported that GOI officials met Sinirlioglu with a "cold shoulder" and expressed outrage that the GOT would sanction the MONE initiatives. The Israeli interlocutors reportedly implied to Sinirlioglu that if such actions were to continue, the GOI would have to institute a program in Israeli schools to discuss the Armenian genocide.

Comment

110. (C) The Turkish-Israeli bilateral relationship has

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survived numerous rough periods before. Erdogan and his administration are fully aware that Turkey must maintain a strong relationship with Israel to achieve its regional goals, bolster its position as a facilitator, and help keep the AGR at bay. Unlike previous episodes, however, the AKP is currently caught in a perfect storm of public outrage and pre-election political opportunism, which has prompted PM Erdogan to make statements that have surpassed anti-Israeli rhetoric emanating from many Arab capitals. Once the crisis subsides and March elections have passed, the GOT will move to mend the damage. However, this reconciliation process could be slowed if Ankara perceives an Armenian genocide resolution (AGR) gaining steam due to a lack of opposition by Israel and its supporters in the U.S.

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Jeffrey